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What Voters Want From
Political Campaign Communication

KEENA LIPSITZ, CHRISTINE TROST,
MATTHEW GROSSMANN, and JOHN SIDES

Conventional wisdom holds that the public dislikes campaigns for their negativity and superficiality, preferring a cleaner, substantive, and more deliberative process. By contrast, the implication of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) Stealth Democracy *is that, while citizens will indeed dislike campaigns, they do not necessarily desire more deliberation, debate, and discussion of issues. Instead they want simple cues that allow them to size up candidates with minimal effort. In this article, we test these theories with survey and focus group data collected during the 2002 California gubernatorial race. Ultimately, the ideal campaign envisioned by the public falls somewhere between the substantive and participatory campaign envisioned by reformers and what we call an "undemanding campaign." We also find that attitudes toward campaigns vary substantially based on political involvement and demographic attributes. Most important, politically involved citizens desire the more substantive campaigns envisioned by reformers, but less involved citizens want less demanding campaigns. This finding suggests not only that any generalizations about what the public wants from campaigns must be cautious, but also that reformers may need to tailor their proposals to the tastes of different groups of citizens if these proposals are to be effective.*

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Keena Lipsitz is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Queens College, City University of New York. Christine Trost is Associate Specialist at the Institute for the Study of Social Change and a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. Matthew Grossmann is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley. John Sides is Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin.

Address correspondence to Christine Trost, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, 210 Barrows Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. E-mail: ctrost@berkeley.edu

Americans love to hate political campaigns. Majorities believe that "negative, attack-oriented campaigning is undermining and damaging our democracy" (82%), that unethical practices in campaigns occur "very" or "fairly" often (58%), and that "in terms of ethics and values, election campaigns in this country have gotten worse in the last 20 years" (53%). Although questionable campaign tactics are nothing new, there is a fairly ironclad conventional wisdom that campaigns are Hobbesian in two ways (nasty, brutish) but, unfortunately, not in a third (short). This distaste for campaigns is not surprising, given that campaigns have become a notable fixture in American political life. Indeed, campaigns are "permanent," say some authors (Blumenthal, 1980; Ornstein & Mann, 2000), because politicians are forever "running scared" and therefore "campaign too much" and "govern too little" (King, 1997). Moreover, the average citizen cannot avoid campaigns. Television in particular has made it possible for politicians to bombard their constituents with carefully crafted messages virtually around the clock. As a child who spotted then Florida Governor Bob Graham at a campaign rally put it: "Daddy, Daddy, there's the man who lives in our TV!"

Although we know that people dislike campaigns, we know comparatively little about what citizens actually want from them, whether those desires are consensual, and, if not, what factors create variation within the public. Answers to these questions will speak to the potential benefits and popularity of proposals to reform campaigns, and will also help illuminate what citizens want from the governmental process more generally.

We begin by developing a theoretical framework for the expectations that voters have of campaigns. Specifically, we propose two hypotheses. The first is derived from claims made by reformers who assert that people want a campaign that is deliberative and substantive. The second hypothesis, which is rooted in research on public opinion toward the political process conducted by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), argues that people want a campaign that actually requires less of them. We test our hypotheses by investigating the kinds of campaign communication citizens want, including its tone, content, and the medium through which it is transmitted. Our findings are based on both a survey of Californians conducted near the end of the 2002 gubernatorial campaign and a series of focus groups conducted in California during the fall of 2002. At the aggregate level, we find support for both "substantive" and "undemanding" campaigns. We also find that what voters want from campaigns depends on such factors as education and political information: Respondents who are more educated and politically informed want more substantive and deliberative campaigns, while those who have less schooling and familiarity with the political process favor simple cues rather than deliberation. Successful efforts to reform campaigns will need to address the implications of this variation.

Theory and Expectations

What does the public want from political campaigns? Answers to this question are explicit in theories of why people dislike campaigns and implicit in proposals designed to remedy this discontent. The conventional wisdom, expressed by many pundits and reformers, focuses on citizens' discontent with common campaign practices, especially negative television advertisements and the paucity of issue discussion. According to this view, citizens want more dialogue with candidates in forums that promote direct contact with candidates and civilized presentation of policy proposals. Campaigns should involve opportunities for *deliberation*, that is, for substantive interaction among citizens and between citizens and politicians that would ideally produce more informed citizen opinions and choices (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004). Candidates should produce longer

political ads and be given free airtime by local television stations in order to make the content of campaign messages and news coverage of the campaign more positive and more substantive (Patterson, 1994; Fallows, 1996). Implicit in these proposals is the belief that the public would be happier if campaigns provided more and better information and enlisted the public in participatory forums.

Recently, however, two scholars have offered a contrasting vision of what citizens want from government. Applying their theory to campaigns suggests that voters want something very different than deliberation about issues. In their book *Stealth Democracy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that citizens are dissatisfied with the government process as much as, if not more than, policy outcomes, and that this "process gap" helps explain their low evaluations of politicians and political institutions. People object to the process because they believe elected officials do not have the best interests of the public at heart (p. 44). Drawing on survey and focus group data, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse demonstrate that citizens do not want more power or more responsibility: "The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision-making" (p. 1). Rather, they would prefer a government that worked in the public's interest without their ongoing input. They also want governance that is free of unnecessary conflict and decision makers who "have found a way to take advantage of their position" (pp. 7, 10). Thus, citizen's dissatisfaction stems from their perception that the political process entails "minutiae, money, and malarkey" (p. 46). This is especially vexing to people because they believe there is a consensus on major societal goals (e.g., a growing economy) and cannot comprehend the justification for disagreement. According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, citizens favor reforms that insulate politicians from special interests. They want a government run by non-self-interested experts, a system called "stealth democracy."

Expectations: Public Attitudes Toward Campaigns

Do the same motivations that underlie the public's desire for stealth democracy also shape public attitudes toward campaigns? If we extend the portrait of public opinion that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse sketch to the realm of political campaigns, it would seem to call into question much of the conventional wisdom about campaign dissatisfaction, including the proposals of reformers who advocate such things as deliberation and more substantive political communication.[1]

First, conventional wisdom suggests that people want more substantive information about the candidates' policy positions. They prefer campaign communication that is informative, comprehensive, and focused on the issues that matter most to the voters. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, however, argue that people are not particularly knowledgeable about specific issues—an uncontroversial claim given other evidence of public ignorance (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996)—and that people tend to associate "dissenting policy proposals with the presence of special interests" (p. 157). Thus, what reformers think of as good campaigning—a clean, no-holds-barred discussion of "the issues"— might in fact be unpalatable to voters, who are not especially motivated to sort through competing policy positions. Moreover, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse state that "item number one" on a stealth democrat's agenda is to "get someone in power who either does not have the ability or the desire to act self-interestedly" (p. 155). If this is the case, then voters will be less interested in the details of a candidate's policy agenda and more interested in information that sheds light on a candidate's character and qualifications for office.

Second, if, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue, citizens do not want to sort through

competing policy positions, then they will not be eager to parse the criticisms that candidates exchange on the campaign trail. Voters will oppose negative campaigning because they do not want to take the time necessary to discern the "truth" about candidates. Instead, they will prefer campaigns in which candidates present positive information about themselves and refrain from criticizing their opponents.[2] According to conventional wisdom, however, although the public may share the stealth democrat's aversion to "negativity" and "attacks," it should value spirited debate and candidates criticizing one another when useful information can be derived from the exchange.

Finally, these perspectives have somewhat different expectations about the modes of communication that voters want. According to the conventional wisdom, people will favor opportunities for citizen and representative interaction, public discussion, and any form of communication that provides substantive information, including speeches, direct mail, issue forums, town hall meetings, and debates. From a stealth democracy perspective, if indeed the public does not want to be more involved in government decision making, it should find opportunities for political discussion about and input into a campaign undesirable as well. Instead, citizens should prefer modes of communication that make minimal demands on their time and attention, enable them to "size up" the candidates quickly, and keep decision making simple and easy by presenting clear choices. Television ads meet these criteria, as long as they are positive; so do televised debates, whose less scripted nature (when compared to policy speeches) may offer voters who want to elect non-self-interested candidates a chance to evaluate candidates' personalities and characters.

If the hypotheses derived from the conventional wisdom hold, we may conclude that reformers are promoting ideas that will increase public satisfaction with campaigns. However, if there is more support for the hypotheses derived from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, then the public may prefer an "undemanding campaign": a campaign in which candidates present voters with positive information about themselves, preferably in a bullet-point fashion, which voters can easily digest at their leisure. In short, voters want to make a quick and relatively effortless decision about whom they trust to act in a more non-self-interested manner in office, so they can move on to more enjoyable pursuits and leave the nasty (and brutish) business of politics to someone else.

Expectations: Variation in Attitudes Toward Campaigns

Both theories of what voters want from campaigns concentrate on aggregate descriptions of public opinion rather than on variation in attitudes. Most proposals for campaign reform implicitly assume that the reforms will appeal to all citizens. In contrast, we hypothesize that there will be substantial and predictable variation in public opinion about campaigns. In particular, we believe political involvement will be the crucial variable: Informed and engaged citizens will prefer the kind of campaign that reformers request; others will prefer a less demanding campaign. Other factors, including ideology, partisanship, gender, ethnicity, and age, will also matter, but in more limited ways.

Political "Involvement." Other research shows that engagement with the political process (measured in terms of education, interest in politics, and political knowledge) fundamentally shapes how people process political information, form attitudes, and act on those attitudes (e.g., Zaller 1992). If political involvement affects attitudes toward campaigns, the central question is, does greater familiarity with politics breed contempt for or complacency with campaigns?[3] Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that "stealth democrats"

are not concentrated heavily among the educated or uneducated.[4] If familiarity with the political process breeds contempt, they say, the relationship is likely to be indirect: Involvement is related to higher expectations of the government, which in turn leads citizens to be more critical of the government when it fails to live up to these expectations (pp. 68–69). Yet, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's models do not include other measures of political involvement, especially political interest and knowledge. We expect that our more fully specified model will show that involved citizens are more concerned with the state of political campaigns. Thus, familiarity with campaigns should breed contempt.

We also hypothesize that the politically involved will have different preferences about the content, tone, and mode of campaign communication. In particular, they will be more interested in campaign messages and forums that include issue discussion. Other scholars have found that the politically informed are more adept at processing and using specific information about issues in their voting decisions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Neumann, 1986; Sniderman, Glaser, & Griffin, 1990). This suggests that respondents who are more politically informed will want to learn about the candidates' issue positions and will support forums, such as debates and town hall meetings, which involve a give-and-take between the candidates or between candidates and voters, revealing the differences between the candidates' policy objectives.

Partisanship and Political Ideology. Scholars believe that party identification is the primary lens through which most citizens view political campaigns (see Miller & Shanks, 1996), but we have no reason to believe that different partisan identifiers prefer alternative campaign practices. We hypothesize that independents, however, will be less satisfied with the candidates and campaign practices in any given campaign than partisans of either stripe. In line with previous research (Doherty & Gimpel, 1997), we expect conservatives to be more interested in learning about candidate "character" than liberals or moderates. We do not expect partisanship or ideology, however, to affect preferred modes of campaign communication.

Gender. Research has shown that women are more likely to oppose political conflict and to prefer consensus building (Elshtain, 1982; Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Tannen, 1994). Thus, we hypothesize that women will be more likely than men to oppose negative campaigning.

Ethnicity and Citizenship. Studies have found that Latinos hold uniformly more optimistic and trusting attitudes about government (Uhlaner & Garcia, 2002). If this orientation is generalizable to other immigrant populations, Asian Americans may hold similar views. We also hypothesize that naturalized immigrants will hold even more positive views, since they have undertaken a significant process of civic education to become citizens— a process that may engender more positive views of the political system. Thus, Latinos and Asians, and especially naturalized immigrants, will have more positive attitudes about campaigns than Whites.

Age. Conventional wisdom suggests that some Americans are nostalgic for campaigns of old, which were allegedly more unscripted and meaningful than today's. Older Americans thus might have different standards than younger citizens for the conduct of political campaigns. More generally, studies have found that age leads to a fixation of attitudes, which may increase resistance to new styles of politics and new pieces of information (Brown, 1981; Carlsson & Karlsson, 1970; Converse, 1969). Such findings suggest that

older respondents may be more concerned with the state of modern campaigns but less interested in watching debates and learning about candidate issue positions; any new piece of information they might learn is unlikely to outweigh a lifetime of accumulated political experience and knowledge.

Data and Measures

To investigate public opinion about campaigns, we rely on two kinds of data, a telephone survey of Californians conducted from October 28 through November 4, 2002, and a series of focus groups that were conducted in September and October 2002. The survey had a sample size of 1,814 adult citizens 18 years old and older and included interviews in both Spanish and English.[5] It was designed to assess respondents' feelings about campaigns, in particular by going beyond simple satisfaction with campaigns to gauge their preferences for modes and the content of campaign communication. In this way, we are better able to judge the relative popularity of participatory and undemanding campaigns among the public.

The survey also asked about the 2002 gubernatorial race in particular. This race featured relatively unpopular candidates: incumbent Democrat Gray Davis, who had only a 39% favorable job rating according to a September statewide poll, and Republican Bill Simon, who was plagued by questions about his business ethics. Davis dominated Simon in terms of advertising and focused his message on these ethical questions. Unenthusiastic reactions to this race are not hard to find. Mark DiCamillo of California's Field Poll said, "It's just a turnoff election. Voters are voting for the candidate they dislike the least, rather than rallying behind the candidate they support. I haven't seen an election like this in my whole career" (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 5, 2002).[6] One advantage of the survey is that we were able to embed within it several experiments that randomized respondents to receive different versions of questions. Below, we draw on experiments that compared reactions to the campaign practices of generic candidates and to those of Davis and Simon. This allows us to investigate whether beliefs about campaigns change when the focus is on a specific race rather than campaigns in the abstract.

We also draw on six focus groups that were conducted in the fall of 2002 in three different California cities, Walnut Creek (a suburb of the Bay Area), Fresno, and Los Angeles, though participants came from surrounding areas as well.[7] The focus groups were run by two facilitators who asked a structured set of questions, but the flow of the discussion depended for the most part upon participants. The advantage of such a forum is that participants can express in their own words their thoughts about campaigns and campaign practices, as well as react and respond to each other's opinions. The disadvantage of focus groups is that they do not provide systematic or readily quantifiable data. For this reason, we use them only to elaborate and, perhaps, complicate survey findings.

Substance or Simplicity?

Voter dissatisfaction with campaigns is well documented, and the 2002 California gubernatorial race was no exception. Large majorities of our survey respondents expressed dissatisfaction with campaigns and with the 2002 gubernatorial campaign in particular. When asked "Would you say you are satisfied or not satisfied with the choices of candidates in the election for Governor on November 5?" 58% said "not satisfied." When asked "More generally, do you think that election campaigns in California have gotten better in the last 10 years, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?" 49% said "worse,"

40% said "the same," and only 10% said "better." A similar degree of dissatisfaction with campaigns emerged in the focus groups. When participants were asked to name things they liked about campaigns, the response was silence, or else participants ignored the question altogether and launched into passionate descriptions of their dislikes.

What is it, specifically, that voters dislike about campaigns, and how might campaigns be changed to increase voter satisfaction? Is voter dissatisfaction a response to the lack of deliberation and substance in campaigns, as reformers argue, or is it caused by campaigns that demand too much of voters? In this section, we examine voter preferences for the tone and content of a candidate's message and the methods that candidates use to communicate their messages to the voters. We find that, at the aggregate level, the public prefers a mix of substance and simple cues.

Reactions to Candidate Criticism

It is common for reformers and citizens alike to complain about the "negativity" of today's campaigns. Yet it is possible that some of this so-called negativity is actually nothing more than healthy political disagreement, and even if it is genuine "mudslinging," there may be kernels of useful information embedded within it. If conventional wisdom is correct and people want substantive information from campaigns, they should be able to distinguish between invective and useful information and perhaps tolerate some of the former to gain the latter. However, if Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's findings about public aversion to political conflict are applicable to campaigns, we can expect people to prefer that candidates avoid criticizing each other, however useful it might be, because people find it too distasteful and difficult to disentangle what is scurrilous from what is useful.

To assess attitudes toward criticism in campaigns, we designed a balanced question about negative campaigning that would give voters reasons to oppose and support criticism between candidates: "Some people say that in general, political candidates should never be critical of their opponents because campaigns have gotten too negative, while others say that candidates need to criticize their opponents because it is important to know the strengths and weaknesses of all candidates. Which of these comes closest to your view?" This question also contained an experiment in which half of the respondents were asked about "political candidates" and the other half were asked about "Gray Davis and Bill Simon." The "candidates" version produced an evenly divided response: 51% said that candidates should not criticize and 49% that they need to criticize. The "Davis and Simon" version produced a more skewed distribution: 62% said that candidates should not criticize and 38% that they need to criticize. These results suggest that voters are not universally or reflexively opposed to criticism in campaigns, but that opposition may increase when voters are reminded of a specific campaign, particularly one that featured a great deal of candidate attacks, as did the 2002 gubernatorial race.

Comments offered by focus group participants indicate that voters have a nuanced approach to criticism in campaigns, which may explain why half of the survey respondents agreed that candidates need to criticize one another. If voters perceive a critical campaign message as providing useful information, they are likely to be more accepting of it. For example, Margaret, a 56-year-old registered Democrat, referred to an arguably negative Davis ad, which focused on lawsuits against Simon for allegedly fraudulent business practices, to illustrate that sometimes "attacks" can be useful:

> When I learned . . . that Simon had a lawsuit against his company, that was
> critical information to me, because I didn't know Simon . . . and that part

about we're the, what is it, the third largest economy in the world or something, that makes me nervous to think that somebody is taking over that job. So that was good information to me, and helpful information to me.

Like Margaret, other focus group participants drew a distinction between criticism and nastiness.

These survey and focus group findings provide mixed support for both the conventional wisdom and the undemanding campaign hypotheses. While many people appreciate the useful information that might arise from candidates' criticizing one another, others—a healthy majority when the question refers to a real campaign—want candidates simply to avoid talking about one another, which suggests they are willing to forgo genuine political discussion and the substantive information it might provide in exchange for more temperate campaign discourse.

Preferred Content of Campaign Communication

If most voters do not want candidates to criticize one another, what do they want candidates to talk about instead? The survey asked respondents: "Overall, what are the top two things that you are most interested in learning about the candidates: stands on the issues, experience, character, intelligence, party platform, campaign practices, or something else?" This list was read in random order, and two responses were recorded. Fully 72% of respondents selected the candidates' stands on issues as their first or second choice. "Character" was in second place (51%), followed by experience (36%) and intelligence (20%). Few respondents cited party platform or campaign practices. These results seem to indicate that the proponents of conventional wisdom are correct: People want substantive information about issues. Yet, the focus group discussions were not so straightforward. When participants were asked to describe what they dislike about campaigns, the lack of time and attention that candidates give to issues was a common refrain. But they also expressed other opinions that seemed to contradict their pleas for candidates to focus on the issues. For example, while participants criticized television ads for not providing enough information about candidate issue positions (due to the brevity of the ads or their negative focus on the opponent), most rejected the idea of requiring candidates to produce longer ads. Some were skeptical that longer ads would, in fact, result in more informative ads (rather than simply longer attacks), while others bristled at the idea of being forced to watch anything longer than 30 seconds, even if the ad were more substantive.

If not longer ads, then how does a candidate provide the voter with more information about his or her issue positions? In general, while participants expressed a desire to learn more about candidates' stands on the issues, it was also clear that quite a few did not want too many details, nor did they want to work too hard to get them. Members of one focus group came up with the idea of requiring candidates to submit a "résumé," and when we suggested the idea to another focus group, they responded with even greater enthusiasm. The idea of a résumé suggests that people want information in a concise, simple format. Moreover, when we asked participants to list the kinds of information they would want in such a document, the candidate's voting record was *fifth* on the list, just below his credit report and just above a paragraph about his relationship with his mother. Neither focus group requested a list of the candidate's issue positions.[8] We do not want to make too much of this exercise, but it does suggest that people are equally, if not more, interested in getting a sense of the candidate as a person than learning about his or her stands on the issues.

The focus group proceedings complicate the survey findings by suggesting that people want more information only if it is presented in a "bullet-point" fashion and does not interfere with their regularly scheduled programming. The proceedings also suggest that some voters want to learn personal information about the candidates so they can decide if they like and trust the candidate. This is a different type of voter than the one envisioned by reformers, and one that is much closer to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's stealth democrat.

Preferred Modes of Communication

Next we consider public opinion about ads and other modes of campaign communication. The undemanding campaign theory predicts public distaste for modes of communication that demand too much effort on the part of voters. By contrast, the conventional wisdom argues that interactive, deliberative forums are precisely what the public wants.

Survey respondents were queried about television ads in the following fashion. If they reported having seen ads by Simon or Davis, they were asked "Have the television ads you have seen been very helpful, somewhat helpful, not too helpful, or not at all helpful to you in deciding which candidate to vote for?" Respondents who reported seeing no gubernatorial ads were asked a similar question that referred to "political ads" more generally. Both questions generated virtually identical responses, with more than two thirds (68%) saying "not too helpful" or "not at all helpful." Thus, the survey findings suggest that few people view television advertising positively.[9] Not surprisingly, focus group participants echoed this sentiment; dissatisfaction with political ads was one of their most frequent complaints about political campaigns. Participants articulated a commonly shared perception that ads function as tools of negative campaigning, which are intended to manipulate rather than inform the voter. Participants were more sanguine about positive ads—ads that feature the candidates simply talking about themselves. Several participants claimed that they would be less bothered by political ads if the candidate would "just talk to you" and avoid mentioning the other candidate. Others even suggested that they might support public financing if receipt of it were conditioned upon candidates staying positive in their advertising. Such comments suggest that people may not oppose advertising itself, but certain kinds of content.

To assess attitudes toward more interactive modes of communication, we asked survey respondents to identify the top two ways they prefer to be communicated with by candidates. We also asked them if more gubernatorial debates would have made the campaign "better," "worse," or "no different."[10] Sixty-four percent of respondents listed televised debates as their first or second choice, while 41% listed town hall meetings as their first or second choice. Call-in shows and speeches were mentioned by about a third of the sample. Mailers and door-to-door interactions were rarely cited.[11] Moreover, 66% of respondents said holding more debates would have improved the campaign.

These findings suggest that reformers are right: Voters do want candidates to engage in more interactive campaign forums. Enthusiasm for debates and town hall meetings was apparent in the focus groups as well. Many people suggested that increasing the number of debates might improve elections in general. However, when the moderators pressed the respondents to explain what they like about debates, it quickly became evident that people prefer them for many reasons besides issue discussion. The comments of several participants suggested that debates offer an easy and relatively effortless cue to help with decision making. Jeff, a young Democrat with little political interest, explained, "I think the debates are usually the . . . that's how you can best get a handle on

someone . . . there are no Tele-promoters, you know, it's on the spot. All of a sudden, they're hit with something and [we get to] see how they react to it." Like Jeff, many participants appreciate the less scripted nature of debates, which create opportunities for viewers to catch a glimpse of the "real" candidate. Many praised town hall meetings for the same reason. To be sure, a few participants argued that debates provide badly needed substance in campaigns, but they were in the minority. For most, debates simply provide an easy way to get a sense of the candidates, which supports the undemanding campaign hypothesis.

Variation in Attitudes Toward Campaigns

Thus far, we have focused on the aggregated perceptions and desires of voters. But do assessments of campaigns vary across voters, and if so, on what basis? Both the conventional wisdom and the undemanding campaign models assume that the public is largely of one mind in their evaluation of current campaigns, their complaints about the campaign process, and their ideal preferences for campaign communications. Our hypotheses suggest that there will be important differences in how different groups of voters view campaigns. To test these hypotheses, we estimate a series of multivariate models. We first examine two different indicators of campaign satisfaction—voters' satisfaction with the candidates and views of campaigns now versus 10 years ago—as well as attitudes toward negative campaigning and political advertising.[12] Models of these indicators are presented in Table 1. We also investigate respondents' preferred modes of communication and their preferred content of campaign communication.[13] Models of these measures are presented in Table 2. Both tables include a variety of demographic and political independent variables.[14]

As expected, Table 1 confirms that partisans are more likely to be satisfied with campaigns than independents. Democrats and Republicans are both more satisfied with candidates and Democrats are more satisfied with the direction of campaigns than independents. There is also evidence that Republicans and Democrats are more likely to find political ads helpful. Moreover, the fourth column of Table 2 demonstrates that ideology is indeed significantly related to preferences about the content of communication: As respondents became more liberal, the probability of preferring issues as opposed to attributes increased. This effect arises because character was a significantly more popular choice among conservatives: 35% of them cited character as their first choice, but only 18% of liberals did.

We also predicted that women would be more averse to negativity and criticism than men. This result is born out in Table 1, which reveals a highly significant negative coefficient for women (–.44). Further investigation shows that when we separate the two versions of this question, the magnitude of the effect of gender on aversion to negative campaigning is more than twice as large when specific candidates (Davis and Simon) are mentioned than when generic "political candidates" are referenced in the question. The effect of being female, *ceteris paribus*, reduces the likelihood of supporting criticism by –.08 in the generic condition, by –.15 in the Davis and Simon condition, and by –.11 overall.[15] Interestingly, there is an unexpected gender gap in preferences for mode of campaign communication. Women are less likely than men to prefer debates over other modes of communication and to believe that debates will improve campaigns. This may be related to their aversion to conflict, since debates can provide a forum for candidate bickering.

With regard to ethnicity, our findings confirm that Latino and Asian immigrants

Table 1

Models of campaign satisfaction and support for negativity and advertising

	Satisfied with candidates (logit)		Campaigns better in last 10 years (ordered probit)		Political ads helpful (OLS)		Support for negative campaigning (logit)	
Education	−.19***	(.06)	−.09**	(.03)	−.10***	(.02)	.10*	(.05)
Political interest	.07	(.08)	−.03	(.04)	.05	(.03)	.16*	(.07)
Political information	−.50***	(.06)	−.12***	(.03)	−.14***	(.02)	.10#	(.05)
Liberalism	.07	(.06)	.03	(.03)	.001	(.02)	−.004	(.05)
Democrat	.74***	(.21)	.30***	(.11)	.21**	(.08)	.27	(.18)
Republican	.58**	(.22)	.11	(.11)	.16*	(.08)	.27	(.18)
Female	.03	(.12)	−.06	(.06)	.01	(.05)	−.44***	(.10)
Black	.30	(.23)	.07	(.13)	.37***	(.10)	.30	(.22)
Asian (native born)	.58#	(.34)	−.02	(.18)	.11	(.14)	−.21	(.31)
Asian (naturalized)	1.15**	(.33)	.60***	(.16)	.63***	(.13)	.49#	(.28)
Latino (native born)	−.004	(.20)	.42***	(.11)	.24**	(.08)	−.03	(.19)
Latino (naturalized)	.69**	(.25)	.92***	(.12)	.25**	(.10)	.60**	(.21)
Other race	−.23	(.39)	−.02	(.21)	.38*	(.15)	.40	(.33)
Age	−.09*	(.04)	−.04#	(.02)	−.04*	(.02)	.004	(.04)
Constant	.47		$\mu_1 = −.40$		1.29		−1.29	
			$\mu_2 = 1.08$					
Log likelihood	−947.85		−1,391.17				−1,152.43	
χ^2	246.53***		239.87***				62.15***	
R^2 or pseudo R^2	.12		.08		.11		.03	
N	1,579		1,597		1,709		1,752	

Note. Entries are coefficients from OLS, logit, or ordered probit models, with standard errors in parentheses. The first two dependent variables are coded 0 (not satisfied) and 1 (satisfied), and 0 (worse), 1 (no difference), 2 (better). The third dependent variable is coded 1 (not at all help-ful) to 4 (very helpful). The final dependent variable is coded 0 (candidates should not be criti-cal) and 1 (candidates need to criticize).

p < .05; **p* < .01; ****p*< .001; #*p* < .10 (two-tailed).

tend to be more positive about the state of political campaigns than Whites. This is consistent with other literature on Latino attitudes toward the political process, and it suggests that this generally positive orientation is also found among Asians. The effect of naturalization is also evident, in that naturalized Asians and Latinos are more satis-fied on both of our measures. Moreover, nearly every single non-White group (Blacks, Latinos, and Asians) finds political advertising more helpful than Whites do. Though overall opinions about campaign advertising were by no means favorable, the variation among respondents suggests that not everyone is repelled by candidates who appear to live in their televisions. Table 1 also shows that both naturalized Asians and Latinos are somewhat more likely to support negative campaigning. It may be that naturalized citi-zens are so keen on participating in the electoral process that they do not mind fisticuffs. Table 2 also provides some evidence that non-Whites have a stronger preference for town hall meetings and for learning about candidate attributes as opposed to issues.

Table 2
Models of preferred mode and content of campaign communication

	Mode			Content
	Debates would help campaign (ordered probit)	Prefer debates (ordered probit)	Prefer town hall meetings (ordered probit)	Prefer issues vs. attributes (logit)
Education	.05 (.03)	.06# (.03)	.07* (.03)	.23*** (.05)
Political Interest	.14*** (.04)	.05 (.04)	.08# (.04)	−.02 (.07)
Political Information	.13** (.03)	.10*** (.03)	.13*** (.03)	.16** (.05)
Liberalism	−.05 (.03)	−.01 (.03)	.07* (.03)	.14** (.05)
Democrat	.02 (.11)	−.02 (.10)	−.19# (.11)	.51** (.18)
Republican	.02 (.11)	.05 (.10)	−.09 (.11)	.22 (.18)
Female	−.17** (.06)	−.13* (.06)	.03 (.06)	.06 (.10)
Black	−.18 (.13)	−.18 (.13)	.49*** (.13)	−.39# (.22)
Asian (native born)	−.35* (.18)	−.20 (.17)	.19 (.18)	−.56# (.30)
Asian (naturalized)	−.25 (.18)	−.09 (.17)	.43** (.17)	−.64* (.29)
Latino (native born)	−.18 (.11)	−.18# (.11)	.27* (.12)	−.50** (.23)
Latino (naturalized)	−.004 (.13)	−.30* (.12)	−.13 (.14)	−.51* (.23)
Other race	.40 (.25)	.06 (.20)	.38* (.20)	−.15 (.35)
Age	−.18*** (.02)	−.06** (.02)	.07*** (.02)	−.14*** (.04)
Constant or μ_1	−2.35	−.14	1.29	−1.06
μ_2	−.65	.41	1.90	
Log likelihood	−1,165.83	−1,700.40	−1,445.17	−1,099.04
χ^2	123.89***	73.41***	101.80***	116.88***
R^2 or pseudo R^2	.05	.02	.03	.05
N	1,706	1,637	1,637	1,672

Note. Entries are logit or ordered probit coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The first dependent variable is coded 0 (worse), 1 (the same), or 2 (better). The next two dependent variables are coded 0 (debates/town hall meetings are not preferred), 1 (debates/town hall meetings are second preference), and 2 (debates/town hall meetings are first preference). The fourth dependent variable is coded 0 (experience/character/intelligence) and 1 (issues/party platform).
    *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$; #$p < .10$ (two-tailed).

These effects emerge even after one controls for political involvement, ideology, and standard SES variables. These ethnic differences indicate that Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians want different things from campaigns, with potentially important implications for candidate strategy and campaign reform.

Age, as we predicted, is associated with greater dissatisfaction with the current state of candidates and campaigns. It is also associated with more negative views of political advertising. The results are not substantively large but suggest, as several senior focus group participants told us, that older voters are nostalgic for campaigning methods from a bygone era. Table 2 shows that older respondents are less likely to prefer debates, to say that debates would have improved the gubernatorial campaign, and to be interested in issue discussion in campaigns. They are, however, more likely to prefer town hall meetings. This provides some evidence that older respondents may be interested in forums

that allow them to share their opinions rather than forums where the candidates do most of the talking (frequently in response not to voters but to questions provided by journalists). Older respondents are also more likely to be interested in learning about attributes of the candidates, primarily their character, as opposed to their issue positions. Character is the first choice of 32% of those 65 and older, but the first choice of only 19% of those ages 18–24. As we suggested earlier, one explanation for these results is that age tends to create more fixed attitudes, rendering issue discussion less useful.

Our primary hypothesis concerned the role of political involvement. We predicted that politically involved citizens would be more concerned with the state of political campaigns and more interested in campaign activities that include issue discussion. These hypotheses are confirmed in Tables 1 and 2. Education and political information have generally robust effects across both indicators of campaign satisfaction. Satisfaction with campaigns declines significantly as one becomes better educated and better informed.[16] Education and political information are also strongly associated with a lower opinion of political advertising. The findings suggest that familiarity with politics does indeed breed contempt: Those who are politically involved and therefore more likely to follow current events, including the gubernatorial campaign, find the proceedings more distasteful.

Aversion to negativity is one explanation for dissatisfaction with campaigns, but this explanation does not accord with our results. The politically involved may be less satisfied with campaigns, but they are *more* tolerant of criticism between candidates, as the fourth model of Table 1 indicates. Political involvement, whether measured by education, interest, or information, is associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing criticism.[17] It may be that the politically involved are more likely to appreciate what might result from a critical exchange between candidates, such as clear distinctions between their policy positions. Or perhaps the involved feel more capable of parsing a critical exchange and extracting useful information. It may also be that involved citizens simply consider such exchanges *de rigueur* and a normal, even acceptable, part of how the game is played.[18] In any case, aversion to negativity cannot explain dissatisfaction among those who are most dissatisfied with campaigns.

Politically involved citizens also have different preferences for how campaigns should be conducted. As Table 2 demonstrates, politically informed and interested respondents prefer debates and town hall meetings to other modes of campaign communication. They are also more likely to believe that several more debates would have improved the gubernatorial campaign. The well educated and politically informed also share a preference for campaign communication that is centered on issues. It is the first choice of just 23% of those with no high school degree but of 57% of those with postgraduate study. The substantive magnitudes of the coefficients for education and political information— holding all other variables at their means and shifting education and information from the 25th to 75th percentiles—are .11 and .08, respectively. Ironically, these findings suggest that the people who support debates and issue content the most are those who probably "need" them the least.

As hypothesized, politically involved voters want different kinds of political campaigns than those who are less educated and informed. In particular, they are more supportive of issue-based messages and modes of campaign communication, as well as critical exchanges between candidates.[19] The reason for campaign dissatisfaction cited by the conventional wisdom—unhelpful political advertising, inadequate discussion of "the issues"—thus reflects mostly the views of the politically involved. By contrast, the reason for dissatisfaction proposed by the alternative hypotheses—that campaigns make too many demands on the voters—seems to account for the opinions of the least politically

involved citizens, who are also most satisfied with campaigns. There is thus some tension between what these theories predict and what our findings suggest. In addition, although Hibbing and Theiss-Morse find that factors such as education and ethnicity are not strongly related to stealth democratic traits (see their Table 6.4, p. 146), we find cleavages within the public along precisely those lines.

Variation across political and demographic groups with respect to their opinions about campaign communication has implications for our broader theories of public opinion about politics and governance. Dissatisfaction with campaigns does not appear to explain much of the oft-lamented low level of political participation. In fact, one could summarize our results by saying that those characteristics that lead to increased satisfaction with campaigns are the *opposite* of those in a standard model of turnout or political participation. Everything that is traditionally positively associated with participation—education, information, strong partisanship, age—is negatively associated with campaign satisfaction, and variables typically negatively associated with participation, such as a non-White ethnic background, are positively associated with campaign satisfaction. This is not to suggest that improving campaigns is an irrelevant goal. However, there may be no necessary connection between the "quality" of the campaign (however conceived) and the participation of voters come election day.

Conclusion

Despite the complexity of public opinion about political campaigns, a picture of what the public wants does emerge from this analysis. Ultimately, it falls somewhere between the substantive and participatory campaign envisioned by reformers and a campaign that demands less of voters.[20] Although the public shares fairly reformist ideas of what campaigns should be like, these ideas are often tempered with sentiments that imply a conception of voter involvement that is less robust than reformers might like. Voters want to learn more about issues, but they want this information distilled. Voters want debates and town hall meetings, but not necessarily to engage in the kind of deliberative democracy that would make ancient Athenians proud. Such events may instead serve as simpler cues about who the candidates are and what they are like as people, which is consistent with work in political behavior that emphasizes the value of heuristics (see Popkin, 1994; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Lupia, 1994). Moreover, while negative campaigning is not by any means popular, voters are not as averse to criticism as conventional wisdom suggests or the undemanding campaign notion implies, in part because voters believe negative ads can provide useful information.

Though public dissatisfaction with campaigns is commonplace, as both the conventional wisdom and undemanding campaign hypotheses predict, it is also the case that voters' views of campaigns depend on such factors as political involvement, ideology, age, gender, and ethnicity. Interestingly, the most politically informed and involved express a greater degree of dissatisfaction with campaigns than others, but not for the reasons that some reformers or the undemanding campaign theory might suggest; our findings show that their dissatisfaction is driven not by an aversion to negativity but by a desire for more substantive and interactive campaigns. This vision of campaigns, however, is not necessarily shared by all segments of the public. While the politically involved are more likely to want to learn about issues and to favor interactive modes of communication, those who are least attentive to politics are more concerned with candidate attributes and are more likely to say they find ads helpful. Conservatives are more interested in learning about the character of candidates. Women are more opposed to

negative campaigning. Blacks, Latinos, and Asians all find political ads more helpful than Whites do.

These findings challenge the assumption that all citizens want more deliberative and substantive political campaigns. While this assumption may hold for one segment of voters—the politically informed and involved—there is evidence to suggest that other voters want campaigns that are less demanding, where citizens are provided with simple cues and clear choices that require minimal time and effort to make. Subsequently, while campaigns will need to weigh the efficiency and potential risks associated with directing resources at citizens who are among the least likely to vote, reformers who seek to reach uninvolved voters and maximize their participation in elections would be wise to develop reforms that appeal not only to those who are politically informed, but, perhaps especially, to those who are not.

In the case of proposals for more and even mandatory debates, the interests of different groups of voters tend to converge. Debates provide substantive discussion of the issues for those who want more information about candidates' issue positions and helpful, time-saving cues for those who are less interested in issues and more interested in assessing a candidate's personality and character. However, other reforms, such as longer ads, would seem to satisfy one segment of the public at the risk of alienating another. While some voters want more substance and emphasis on issues, others are put off by too much information and the effort required to sift through it. Our findings also suggest that reformers should devote some of their energy to reforms that will appeal to voters who want campaigns that make minimal demands on their time and attention, such as ballot notations and detailed voter guides that provide information about candidates in an efficient, user-friendly way. Moreover, reforms designed to limit critical exchanges between candidates (e.g., codes of conduct) might also be misplaced because they overlook the public's nuanced acceptance of certain forms of criticism. In other words, the fact that negativity is in the eye of the beholder complicates any effort to promote "positive" campaigning. This does not mean that reformers should capitulate to stealth democrats and abandon their efforts to create more substantive campaigns, or that candidates should simply leave voters alone, but that more thought should be given to how campaigns can be reformed in a manner that appeals to citizens with varying levels of political interest and involvement.

Notes

1. We should emphasize that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's research centers not on campaigns but on the political processes inherent in governance. Thus, our use of this research to formulate hypotheses about attitudes towards the campaign process entails inferential "leaps"— leaps that we feel are a logical consequence of the public attitudes Hibbing and Theiss-Morse identify.

2. It may be, however, that voters have a different view of conflict in campaigns than they do of conflict in the course of governance, which is Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's primary concern.

3. By contempt, we mean that the more voters know and care about the political process, the more they will dislike what they see. By complacency, we mean that the more voters know and care about the political process, the more desensitized or savvy they will be about its nature.

4. In particular, they find that education has a marginal negative effect on support for stealth democracy (p. 146).

5. The total sample size is actually 2,000, but we removed self-identified noncitizens from the analysis. The sample was selected with random-digit dialing, and the response rate was 23.3%. Interviewers identified respondents by asking to speak with the adult in the household who had

most recently celebrated his or her birthday, and 8 call attempts were made before giving up. Interviewing was done by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvales, Inc. The average length of each interview was 24 minutes.

   6. Although DiCamillo proclaims the uniqueness of this election in terms of voters' dissatisfaction with the candidates, in other respects, including those that lie at the center of this analysis— the tone, content and method of campaign communication—the campaign was quite conventional and characteristic of the heavily media-based statewide races that have become the norm in California and, increasingly, in other states. This particular campaign differs from campaigns that are less competitive and characterized by a significant asymmetry in resources between the two candidates—as is the case, for example, in many House elections that featured a well-established incumbent. In such cases, there is often much less of a campaign for voters to observe.

   7. In Walnut Creek, one group was composed of young people aged 18 to 35, and the other of older people aged 55 and above. In both Fresno and Los Angeles, one group was composed of strong partisans and the other of independent or "swing" voters. Swing voters were defined as partisan independents who said that they usually vote a split ticket. We chose these particular cities and these criteria for inclusion to investigate whether they produced any noticeable variation in opinions about campaigns. Each focus group had 9–15 participants and lasted 2 hours. Fleischman Field Research in Walnut Creek and Adept Consumer Testing in Encino recruited focus group participants from their databases. AIS Market Research in Fresno recruited participants from the county registered voter file. Out of the total number of focus group participants (91), nearly half (49%) were female. Thirty-six percent identified as independent, 32% as Republican, and 32% as Democrat. The ethnic breakdown of the participants was 56% White, 17% Latino, 14% African American, 6% Asian American, and 2% other. Participants also varied in age, education, income, and attentiveness to politics. All focus groups were videotaped.

   8. Categories for the candidate résumé included tax returns, race, religion, DMV records (including DUIs), other public offices held, whether they came from a "broken home," education, the city they grew up in, their strongest supporters, criminal records, hobbies, last three places of residence, their role models, and an objective or mission statement that explained, in 500 words or less, why they wanted to be elected.

   9. Over $110 million was raised and spent on the 2002 California gubernatorial race, and an estimated 70% of this went to purchase ads.

   10. There was only one debate between the major candidates in the race. It was held in Los Angeles at noon on a Monday 4 weeks before the election and was carried live by only four local television stations. Thus, the number of viewers was exceedingly low. In general, there will always be some disjuncture between what voters say they want in campaigns and what they actually "consume"—that is, between attitudes and behavior. However, there is still value in understanding what voters want in campaigns, even if that is only what they want "in theory."

   11. Since survey respondents were prompted throughout the survey to think about the gubernatorial race, they may have had this kind of race in mind and thus considered door-to-door contact unfeasible.

   12. In the model of attitudes toward negative campaigning, the dependent variable is coded 0 if respondents were averse to negative campaigning and 1 if they saw it as necessary. The results combine the two experimental conditions ("candidates" and "Davis and Simon"). Perceived helpfulness of advertising is a scale ranging from 1 (not at all helpful) to 4 (very helpful). Here we also combined the two versions of the question.

   13. To assess mode, we examine three indicators. The first is whether respondents believe that debates would have improved the gubernatorial campaign (coded 0 for worse, 1 for no difference, and 2 for better). The next two indicators measure general preferences for debates and town hall meetings as modes of communication. Both are coded 0 if respondents did not mention debates or town hall meetings as their preferred mode of communication, 1 if it was their second choice, and 2 if it was their first choice. The final indicator captures whether respondents want to learn about issues or candidate attributes. The dependent variable is coded 1 if respondents said they were most interested in learning about "issues" or the "party platform." If respondents said

they were most interested in learning about "character," "experience," or "intelligence," it is coded 0. Those who answered "campaign practices" are excluded, since the answer does not fit neatly into this dichotomous typology. Our measure elides some detail in respondent preferences but captures a crucial distinction in terms of the type of information that voters want.

14. The models include three measures of political involvement or awareness: education, political information, and political interest. Information is measured by asking respondents to identify the offices held by Diane Feinstein, Tony Blair, and Colin Powell. In this sample, the mean number correct was 1.7 (SD =1.2). The measure of political interest derives from this question: "Generally speaking, how much interest would you say you have in politics—a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or none?" They also include a measure of ideology and partisanship, which we measure as a dummy for Democrat and for Republican, with independents the excluded category. (The measure of ideology derives from this question: "Would you consider yourself to be politically very liberal, somewhat liberal, middle-of-the-road, somewhat conservative, or very conservative?") We include dummy variables for gender and for ethnicity/citizenship. Ethnicity and citizenship are captured with a series of dummy variables—for Blacks, naturalized and native Asians, and naturalized and native Latinos—with Whites as the excluded category. Since there were only five naturalized Blacks and five naturalized Whites in this sample, we do not break down Blacks and whites by citizenship status. Age is an ordinal variable capturing six age cohorts.

15. The bivariate relationship bears this out as well. The percentages of men and women who support criticism in the generic case are 54 and 44, respectively. In the Davis and Simon condition, there is a larger gap: 46% versus 31%.

16. For example, an increase in political information from 0 (none correct) to 3 (all correct) reduces the probability of expressing satisfaction with Davis and Simon by .32, *ceteris paribus*.

17. Holding other variables at their means, a shift from the 25th to the 75th percentile in education is associated with a .05 increase in the probability of finding criticism necessary. The comparable effect for political interest is .04; for political information, it is .05.

18. The notion that attacks are just part of the game also emerged in the focus groups.

19. It may be that respondents generally, and educated respondents in particular, are expressing support for debates and issues in part because these are the "socially desirable" responses—that is, the things that we should want out of campaigns, even if they are not what we really want. We have no way to determine whether this is true given these data. However, our results comport with other related findings—for example, that educated voters draw more strongly on issues in deciding how to vote—which suggests that they are not just an artifact of this bias.

20. Given that the survey response rate was 23%, there may be a much larger population of stealth democrats than our findings suggest.

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